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"A name that featured once or twice a year; Not noticing French New Caledonia in mid-20th century British Australia"

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Australian readers in the mid-twentieth century were offered a single-dimensional representation of New Caledonia as a European settler colony, integrated into world trade, modern and prosperous, and with a nearly invisible, presumably compliant indigenous population. The boom in the use of photographs for illustration in magazines, newspapers, serial encyclopaedia, postcards, stereographs, lantern slides, gift albums, exhibitions and museum displays between 1895 and 1930 offered the federated British colonies, recently united as Australia, the chance to acquire a visual familiarity with the neighbouring southwest Pacific. The conceptualisation of a region including the New Hebrides Condominium (Vanuatu), British Solomon Islands Protectorate, Australian Territory of Papua, German, and later the Mandated Territory of New Guinea and the British Crown Colony of Fiji encircled but did not include New Caledonia.¹ Based on illustrated English language books and magazines such as *National Geographic*, *Pix* and *Walkabout*, this paper positions what Australians learnt-by-looking at and looking-past published photographs of New Caledonia in 1930 to 1970. Not acknowledging New Caledonia, or knowing it only through mediated, uncontested visual evidence, is then positioned against a background of broader Australia-New Caledonia histories and relationships.

There is an increasing interest in visual histories in the Pacific and a growing body of analysis of the colonial photography found in personal albums and in the loose, often incomplete collections of museums, institutions and repositories as well as in scientific and expedition reports.² This research has highlighted nuances in and beyond the frame and put individual images under aesthetic, scientific and philosophical scrutiny and has begun to create greater historical awareness of "globally disseminated and locally appropriated" images and their impact on metropolitan self-identity.³ However, this research is usually focused on interpreting the evidential aspect of a single image, or images not seen by the general public, or images not seen at all until a hundred years later. The emphasis is often on the photographer in the field or the use made of the image by seminal Euro-American thinkers, professors and authors who gained access to the images. The documentary role of images published in newspapers, magazines, books and encyclopaedia is acknowledged but the next empirical steps of measuring public accessibility and an image's power to shape public opinion have not been taken. Graham Clarke claims "documentary photography has dominated the photographic history of the twentieth century ... whether it was in *Picture Post*, *Time Magazine*, *Life* or a newspaper, the photograph as evidence of events was basic to the presentation of the story." If this is a reasonable claim, why have historians been slow to examine the power of images in the social or public arena?

Scholars have avoided positioning photography's output in relation to the stereotyping of races, tribes and nations, yet this is what happened in the social arena or public domain, when the general public saw images of Hawaii, Tahiti, New Caledonia, the Arctic or the Philippines in profusely illustrated

¹ Dutch West New Guinea was also excluded from magazine and newspaper reportage and rarely covered in popular travelogues. The Torres Strait also was not seen as a separate entity, but part of Queensland, and later the Commonwealth of Australia.

² For example, more than a 60 papers have been presented at the "images and representation" panels at the bi-annual Pacific History Association Conferences since 1996. These papers have appeared in special issues of *Pacific Studies* (1997) and the *Journal of Pacific History* (forthcoming) and in other publications.

³ Christopher Pinney, "Introduction; How the other half ..." in Christopher Pinney and Nicolas Peterson, eds, *Photography's other histories*, Durham, Duke University Press, 2003, 1. See also, Edwards, Elizabeth, *Raw histories; photographs, anthropology and museums*, Oxford, Berg, 2001; Edwards, Elizabeth, *Anthropology and photography 1860-1920*, New Haven, Yale University press 1992.

books and magazines and concluded, for example, that they now “know about Fiji”.⁴ As Benito Vergara argues for the Philippines, “pictures in mass circulation would substantiate existing notions ... readers/viewers were in no position to question the validity of the pictures for these were of a world beyond most of their experiences.” He concluded that photography was the source of what American readers knew as “the Philippines”⁵ and I wish to make a similar claim here, with the disclaimer that what Australians knew about “New Caledonia” was affected by a smaller gallery of images and the tendency for popular literature and photo-journalism about New Caledonia to be more silent and silencing than it was revealing.

Although Australia had historic trade, investment and shipping links with New Caledonia, for most of the 20th century, as John Connell and John Lawrey note, New Caledonia was marginalised as an imperial matter between France and the United Kingdom and Canberra had little chance of developing comprehensive bilateral relationships with Noumea.⁶ Australian interest in the southwest Pacific declined when a post-World War I promise of imperial and commercial expansion came to nothing. Australia was left with a joint Mandatory role in Nauru and sole responsibility for the former German New Guinea, later linked to its existing colonial administration of Papua. New Caledonia remained unimportant in the Australian consciousness of the region during these post-war realignments. Australians had been involved in mining, shipping and commerce, tens of thousands of postcards depicting New Caledonia had circulated in Australia during the 1895-1915 postcard craze and, as the author Wilfred Burchett noted, Noumea was listed as a port-of-call on post-1900 Pacific tourist routes. Mid-century, the Noumea coup that removed the pro-Vichy government in 1940 was widely reported, but misunderstood and generally regarded as a minor side-show to the real war in Europe.⁷ Although wartime censorship prevented news of the “Battle of the Coral Sea” being published until after the battle was over, Australians knew Noumea was a key supply base in the war. However, fourteen years

⁴ I cite the Philippines, Hawaii, Tahiti, the Arctic and New Caledonia because they are the first to be subjected to this type of research; Benito Vergara, *Displaying Filipinos; photography and colonialism in early 20th century Philippines*, Manila, University of Philippines Press, 1995; Trehin, Jean-Yves, Tahiti; *L'Éden à l'épreuve de la photographie*, Papeete, Musée de Tahiti et des Îles/Gallimard, 2003; Kakou, Serge, *Découverte photographique de la Nouvelle-Calédonie 1848-1900*, Noumea, Actes Sud, 1998; King JCH and Henrietta Lidchi, eds, *Imaging the Arctic*, London, British Museum press, 2000. The role of illustrated magazines and postcards in creating a visual knowing of indigenous people, by national or proto-national nomenclature, is the subject of two seminal works; see, Christraud Geary and Virginia Lee Webb, eds, *Delivering views; distant cultures in early postcards*, Washington, Smithsonian Institution, 1994, and Catherine Lutz and Jane Collins, *Reading National Geographic*, Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1993. See also, Quanchi, Max, “A trip through the islands in 1918; the photography of TJ McMahon”, *Meanjin*, 1994, 714-22; Quanchi, Max, “TJ McMahon; photographer, essayist and patriot in colonial Australia, the Pacific and Empire”, in *Messy entanglements*, edited by Alaima Talu and Max Quanchi, Brisbane: Pacific History Association, 1995, 49-62; Quanchi, Max, “Thomas McMahon; photography as propaganda in the Pacific Islands”, *History of Photography*, 21, 1, 1997, 42-53; Quanchi, Max, “Pacific Island photography; knowledge and history in the public domain”, *Spectator*, 23, 1, 2003, 13-26; Quanchi, Max, “Contrary images; photographing the new Pacific in Walkabout magazine”, *Journal of Australian Studies*, 79, 2003, 77-92; Quanchi, Max, “The power of pictures; learning-by-looking at Papua in illustrated newspapers and magazines”, *Australian Historical Studies*, 35, 123, 2003, 37-53; Quanchi, Max, “The imaging of Samoa in illustrated magazines and serial encyclopaedia in the early 20th century”, in *Papers presented at the Social Change in the 21st Century Conference*, Brisbane, (online at www.socialchange.qut.edu.au) This discussion does not include recent pictorial histories which are mostly uninformed by current historiography and do not tackle questions of evidence, function, display, materiality, consumption, or exchange.

⁵ Benito Vergara, *Displaying Filipinos*, 82

⁶ Connell J, *New Caledonia or Kanaky? The political history of a French colony*, Canberra, Australian National University 1987, 106-7 and 120; Lawrey J, “A catch on the boundary; Australia and the Free French movement in 1940”, *Journal of Pacific History*, 10, 1975, 65-66; Dorney M, 1984, *Politics in New Caledonia*, Sydney, Sydney University Press; Ward A, 1982, *land and politics in New Caledonia*, Canberra, Australian National University, 1-12.

⁷ Lawrey J, 1975, 64-82; Simmington M, “Australia and the New Caledonian coup d'état of 1940”, *Australian Outlook*, 1976, 30, 1, 75-92.

after the Pacific War made Noumea one of the biggest and most important Allied bases, *Walkabout* reminded readers that New Caledonia was “nevertheless practically unknown to most Australians”.⁸

Early in the twentieth century Australian readers were able to recognise locations, activities and indigenous people in a profuse gallery of photography from these neighbouring Pacific Islands. There were at least fifty heavily illustrated English language publications offering a weekly, monthly or quarterly kaleidoscope of Pacific Island material including *The Queenslander*, *Sydney Mail*, *Australasian*, *Town and Country Journal*, *Wide World Magazine* and *Lone Hand*. However, New Caledonia rarely featured in this media, and access to visual material on New Caledonia was limited to one or two photographs in English language travelogues including Julian Thomas (“The Vagabond”) *Cannibals and convicts* (1887), Clement Wragge *The romance of the south seas* (1906), JW Gambier *Links in my life on land and sea* (1906), Charles de Courcy-Parry *Wanderings in the Pacific* (1924), WR Smith *In southern seas* ((1924), GHP Muhlhäuser *The cruise of the Amaryllis* (1925), EH Dodd *Great Dipper to Southern Cross* (1930), Beatrice Grimshaw *Isles of adventure* (1931), and Ralph Bellamy *The real south seas* (1933).⁹

The only English language books prior to 1940 to focus solely on New Caledonia were George Griffith *In an unknown prison land; an account of convicts and colonists in New Caledonia with jottings out and home* (1901) with 24 photographs mostly of Noumea and prison buildings and Emma Hadfield *Among the natives of the Loyalty group* (1920) with 56 photographs of the Loyalty Islands.¹⁰ In a bibliography in his *Pacific Treasure Island* in 1941, Wilfred Burchett was able to include nineteen books in French, but could only list Griffith’s *In an unknown prison land* and the news magazine *Pacific Islands Monthly* for his English readers.

The Pacific War created a new interest in New Caledonia and *National Geographic* (which had good sales in Australia), *Pix*, *Walkabout* and other magazines published illustrated articles to inform readers about New Caledonia’s role in the war. *National Geographic* published articles by Douglas Oliver and Enzo de Chatelet in June and July 1942.¹¹ Only one of the 22 photographs in Oliver’s article was on New Caledonia. The general lack of material on New Caledonia was inadvertently highlighted by the *National Geographic* editor’s when a footnote was able to cite only three previous articles on New Guinea and four articles generally about the Pacific.¹²

The war led to four new illustrated English language books being published. Wilfred Burchett’s *Pacific Treasure Island* was re-issued in 1942 with a further three editions in 1944 in Bombay, Philadelphia and Melbourne. Burchett included 27 full page black and white photographs or roughly one every ten pages. Sidney Reichenbach’s *All you wanted to know about New-Caledonia* was published in Noumea without illustrations in 1942 but was quickly reissued later in the year in Sydney in an illustrated edition with 16 photographs. Two books came out in 1944, HEL Priddy’s *Cannibal Island; the turbulent story of New Caledonia’s coasts* with 16 photographs and drawings and HP Schmidt’s *New Caledonia to know her is to love her* with 30 photographs. These photographs were mostly tourist-type views or reprints of postcards from the early 1900s, presented misleadingly as contemporary photographs. The quantity of accessible visual evidence on New Caledonia was insignificant and the hundred photographs of New Caledonia published in English-language books prior to 1940 and another

⁸ Lyons L and Lyons M, “New Caledonia and its links with Australia”, *Walkabout*, March 1959, 10.

⁹ For example, Clement Wragge in *The romance of the South Seas* (London, Chatto and Windus 1906) included 26 photographs of New Caledonia in a profusely illustrated book of 307 pages and 84 photographs; W Ramsay Smith, *In southern seas*, (London, John Murray 1924) included only a photograph of Ile Nou prison, an ox-cart, a Kanak skull and two views of Noumea harbour among 30 photographs of New Guinea, New Hebrides and Australia. R Reynell Bellamy, *The real south seas*, (London, John Long, 1933) offered half of his 40 photographs on New Caledonia. Other books before 1940 included only a few photographs of New Caledonia; for example, Smith 1924, 5 of 30; de Courcy-parry 1924, 13 of 16; Grimshaw 1931, 4 of 30.

¹⁰ Hadfield E, *Among the natives of the Loyalty group*, London, Macmillan 1920

¹¹ Oliver, Douglas, “Treasure Islands of Australasia”, *National Geographic*, 81, 6, June 1942, 691-722; Chatrelet, Enzo de, “War awakens New Caledonia”, *National Geographic*, 82, 1, July 1942, 31-55.

¹² Footnote, page 691, *National Geographic*, 81, 6, June 1942

hundred in books published during the war were overwhelmed by profusely illustrated magazine publications on British possessions in the South-west Pacific.

In 1949, the limited material available on New Caledonia meant that *Walkabout* readers were directed only to the books by Burchett, Priddy and Schmidt. As a promotion for his book in 1941, Burchett published articles in *Digest of World Reading*, *The Age* (Melbourne), *Advertiser* (Adelaide), *Argus* (Melbourne), *Australia-Asiatic Bulletin* and *Pix* but Australian readers lacked a comprehensive visual reference library on New Caledonia. Burchett thought New Caledonia “a name that featured once or twice a year as a goal of a tourist cruise to the South Seas”¹³ and Australian ignorance of New Caledonia was consistently noted by *Walkabout*’s authors. In January 1942, an anonymous column (probably written by *Walkabout*’s editor, Charles Homes) lamented that Australians did not realise the potential advantages of visiting a part of France a mere eight hours flying time away.¹⁴ HEL Priddy’s *Walkabout* article repeated this plea a few months later.¹⁵ This alleged ignorance prompted *Walkabout*’s editors to take the unusual step of including maps showing Australia’s proximity to New Caledonia, a practice not adopted for other Pacific Island articles¹⁶ and in April 1940, *Walkabout* tried to prompt some interest by including a small column on “A corner of France in Australia” on the Lapérouse monument and land gift in perpetuity at Botany Bay, Sydney.¹⁷

Despite exceptional interest in indigenous bodies, rituals, material culture and customs especially after the mid-1890s when half-tone reproduction meant photographs could be published on newsprint, New Caledonia’s Kanak population, allegedly declining, marginalised and restricted to remote reservations, offered little attraction to authors, photographers and editors. English authors visiting Noumea *en route* to other ports, highlighted British colonies and only included one or two photographs of non-British colonial towns or harbours just to say “I was there”. New Caledonia was excluded as it was not a major British port-of-call and as a French possession was of peripheral interest to Australian entrepreneurs and investors. It was not regarded as falling within Australia’s strategic or diplomatic sphere and it was precluded from potential British-Australian sub-imperialist expansion.¹⁸

From inception in 1934 through to closure in 1974, *Walkabout; Australia and the South Seas*, later shortened to just *Walkabout*, consistently included illustrated articles on the western Pacific. Fifty-two percent of *Walkabout*’s Pacific coverage was on Papua and New Guinea. Although New Caledonia had to compete for space with other popular destinations - the Solomon Islands, Tahiti, and Fiji¹⁹ - the nineteen illustrated articles on New Caledonia in 1934-74 comprised 25 percent of *Walkabout*’s non-Papua and New Guinea coverage of the Pacific. Balanced against this level of coverage was New Caledonia’s omission from the monthly “Our Cameraman’s *Walkabout*” photography supplement, (not appearing at all among 158 featured Pacific Island photographs) and omission from the special “Island *Walkabout*” feature on Pacific countries that ran over six editions in 1971-72.

The first photographs of New Caledonia to appear in *Walkabout* included a view of Noumea looking over the town towards the *Vallée du Génie* and the military barracks and a crowd scene of uniformed indigenous *gendarmes*, French officials and colonists waiting on the quay for an arriving steamer. Three years later a portrait of a Kanak *gendarme*, a view of Noumea’s wharves and harbour and an urban streetscape were published and while clearly taken in a French colony they could have been

¹³ Burchett W, *Pacific Treasure Island*, Melbourne, Cheshire, 1941, 11.

¹⁴ Anon, “Pacific Treasure Island”, *Walkabout*, January 1942, 43. This was an editorial-cum-book review of Burchett’s book of the same name.

¹⁵ Priddy HEL, “The port of Noumea”, *Walkabout*, July 1942, 10. Priddy contributed four illustrated articles to *Walkabout*. In 1944 he published *Cannibal island; the turbulent story of New Caledonia’s cannibal shores* and in 1945 *The war from Coconut Square; the story of the defence of the island bases of the South Pacific*, Wellington, Reed.

¹⁶ A third of the New Caledonia articles in *Walkabout* included a map.

¹⁷ Anon, “A corner of France in Australia”, *Walkabout*, April 1940, 45-46.

¹⁸ As Roger Thompson has pointed out, by the 1920s Australian hopes of sub-imperialism in the western Pacific had faded and the “age of expansion” was over; Thompson R, *Australian imperialism in the Pacific; the expansionist era 1820-1920*, Melbourne, Melbourne University Press, 1980; Thompson R, *Australia and the Pacific Islands in the Twentieth Century*, Melbourne, Australian Scholarly Publishers, 1998.

¹⁹ 83 articles and 293 photographs were devoted to these four colonial possessions, or roughly 40% of the coverage devoted to Papua and New Guinea (with 197 articles and 850 photographs).

photographed anywhere in the French colonial empire in the 1930s. Many of the photographs contained no indexical sign within the image to suggest the setting was New Caledonia, and the streetscapes, harbour views and a car parked at a scenic lookout could have been taken in any rural area or provincial city across the world. In 1939, two more illustrated articles on New Caledonia appeared in *Walkabout* and included views of Noumea, the harbour, mining, farming, the coast and mountainous interior. While the ratio between urban, mining, shipping and farming photography was consistent with the published photography of other Pacific Island colonies, the exclusion of the Kanak and Loyalty Islander population from this visual record is noticeable.

Walkabout depicted New Caledonia as a successful French settler colony by including photographs of city and harbour scenes in Noumea (21%), missions, mining and farming, (33%) and Japanese, Javanese and Tonkinese workers (11%). Kanaks and Loyalty Islanders were anonymous in labouring roles and in the foreground of scenic views (14%). The emphasis on nickel, cattle and coffee underplayed the impact in New Caledonia of copra, cotton, chrome mining, tourism and the massive economic, infrastructure and social changes wrought by the American presence during the war. Reflecting the travelogue nature of some articles, 21% of the photographs in *Walkabout* were picturesque views of rivers, coasts and particularly the mountainous *Chaine Centrale*.²⁰

The photographic evidence suggested a level of planter prosperity that was not matched by actual development. Prior to 1942, “life for European settlers especially in the more remote regions of the Grande Terre was narrow, introspective and for many one of considerable poverty.”²¹ Cattle, coffee, sisal, cotton and copra were all struggling. In 1939, Basil Hall included five photographs of rural industry and declared cattle and coffee was a strange combination but spoke enthusiastically of *la brousse* (the bush) where he found “the sort of self-reliant bushman any country would be proud to own. These are the people who use the mountain tracks – the real New Caledonians.”²² In 1953, Charles Sayers reported there was little likelihood of rural prosperity until French settlers developed better crops, grazing practices and breeding. Kanak were dismissed as “fair farmers” left to themselves to use simple farming methods to meet their own needs.²³ His caption on a scenic view of the Farino valley informed readers there was little cultivation in the interior and cattle relied on unimproved natural pasture. However, other photographs of cattle grazing in grassy river valleys, substantial farm buildings, laden ox-carts and groves of coffee gave the impression visually that rural settlers were doing well. In 1944, HP Schmidt included only four of rural industry in the thirty photographs in his book, but noted “every kind of vegetable thrives well with the exception perhaps of celery and cauliflower, although in the cooler inland valleys cauliflowers can be grown. Fruit is abundant.” The photograph on the opposite page depicted a fine tree lined road leading to an allegedly successful planter’s residence.²⁴

The selection of a few photographs for publication involved several points of culling, discrimination and choice by photographers, authors, editors and publishers. The few published tended to ignore sandalwood, beche-de-mer, trochus, chrome, copra, cotton and kauri pine and highlighted the coffee industry, focussing in particular on the unusual manner in which it was grown under plantation rows of shade trees. Coffee was an exotic and unusual crop to most Australians and was linked by Australian readers to the French preference for drinking coffee not tea. In 1953, New Caledonia was reported to be exporting a respectable 2000 tons of coffee a year to France and producing “a good quality palatable *arabique* (Arabica) which yields well and could be further developed”. This was misleading as coffee cultivation collapsed in the 1960s and by the 1980s was being imported from Vanuatu and Papua New Guinea.²⁵ Burchett thought Kanak coffee growers on the East Coast who produced for profit were

²⁰ The phrase, *Chaine centrale*, was used in many articles, but later disappeared from use in English language publications.

²¹ Connell J, 1987, 111.

²² Hall B, “Cross country in New Caledonia”, *Walkabout*, October 1939, 15-18; including 8 photographs and a map. In a strange twist, Europeans claimed the title “Caledoniens” although it was first attributed to the indigenous people of Grande Terre. Equally, indigenous people lost Caledonien as a title but later claimed the originally derogatory French term “*Canaque*” as their own, but now spelt, as political statement, as “Kanak”.

²³ Sayers CE, “New Caledonia”, *Walkabout*, July 1953, 29-32

²⁴ Schmidt HP, 1944, *New Caledonia; know her to love her, a documentary survey of the French colony with illustrations*, Sydney, George Jones, 64-65.

²⁵ Sayers C, 1953, 31; Connell J, 1987, 140

“small capitalists” and “Europeanised” compared to Kanak in the interior who grew coffee for their own domestic, subsistence consumption.²⁶

Nickel mining was presented as a New Caledonian success story in both images and text in *Walkabout*. There were no photographs of equipment or actual mine operations until 1959, as photographers rarely visited the remote mining locations. Numerous views of Doniambo smelter, harbours at Anse du Tir and Baie de la Moselle and photographs of railway lines and trains, a popular mid-century icon of modernity and economic progress suggested a busy export trade. Australian involvement in the early exploration, engineering, mine development and the sale of coal from Port Kembla and Newcastle to the SLN (*Société le Nickel*) were stressed but there was no reference in the text to the post-World War II domination of the nickel industry by SLN or its enormous social and economic impact in what had become “a company colony”.²⁷ Readers had no way of knowing the power exerted by an alliance between French capital and a local elite, relying on an imported labour force.²⁸ Australian readers may have felt familiar with mining in New Caledonia because mining was being promoted in Australia as a technological success offering export earnings and employment and as a clean industry conducted in remote locations and remote bulk-carrier terminals and ports.

Links to Australia were stressed in the text. Student language exchanges, kauri pine and cattle hide imports were cited as potential relationships of mutual benefit. In 1935, Basil Hall, a regular commissioned photographer and writer in *Walkabout*, predicted a closer association on the basis of economic links through reciprocal nickel, chrome and coal exports.²⁹ The *niaouli* tree (*melaleuca leucodendron*) was mentioned because its oil was similar to the eucalyptus of Australia and was also distilled and bottled as a medicinal essence.³⁰ Elizabeth Nicholls thought “the vegetation appears to be not unlike that of the Australian bush” and the attitude that Europeans “could not stand up to manual work in the tropics”, a popular belief in 19th century Australia, was reported to be still voiced in New Caledonia.³¹ British authors mentioned a café in Noumea where it was possible to buy a pot of tea.³² The literary device in travel writing of finding similarities between the exotic and home partly explains the constant reference to Australia. *Walkabout* was also conceived as a nationalist platform to promote trade, investment and travel opportunities in Australia and the Pacific region so readers expected to find literary and visual references to Australia.

New Caledonia’s convict past was never emphasised in illustrations. With only one photograph of the ruined *bagne* (prison) at Ile Nou, *Walkabout*’s readers could have missed the fact that New Caledonia had a recent penal history. Visually expurgating the penal past contrasts with a literary convention that highlighted the convict stain and legacy of despair well into the mid-twentieth century. For example, in 1906 Gambier announced “a more deadly and depressing hole than Port of France (Noumea) cannot be well imagined with all the added horrors of cruelty and brutality” and in 1925 Muhlhauser thought Noumea a depressing town in which convictism had “cast blight on the place from which it has never recovered and even today it still seems the abode of terror”. Neither included photographs of the prison ruins or of ex-convicts working on concessions (farm allotments).³³ Although the number of convicts transported in 1864-1897 was 21600, several writers claimed 40000 had been sent to New Caledonia.³⁴ The omission visually of the convict legacy is surprising as the penal histories of Norfolk Island and Port Arthur were popular in Australian illustrated magazines. Key events such as the 1917 rebellion, the coup of 1940, the ending of the oppressive *Indigénat* (1887-1946), the politicization and Kanak

²⁶ Burchett W, 1941, 65; Sayers CE, 1953, 31.

²⁷ Connell J, 1987, 124; Lyons M, *The totem and the tricolour; a short history of New Caledonia since 1774*, Sydney, UNSW Press, 109;

²⁸ Ward A, Connell J and Spencer M, “Introduction; the Coq and the Cagou” in Ward A, Connell J and Spencer M, eds, *New Caledonia; essays in nationalism and dependency*, Brisbane, UQP, 1988, 7

²⁹ Hall B, “The tri-colour in the South Seas”, *Walkabout*, December 1939, 17. This was the second article by Hall after a trip to New Caledonia in 1939.

³⁰ Hall B, October 1939, 15.

³¹ Hall B, December 1939, 18.

³² Lees C and Lees L, “New Caledonia to-day”, *Walkabout*, March 1949, 13. Wrigley H, “New Caledonia – Australia’s exotic next door neighbour”, *Walkabout*, October 1956, 18.

³³ Gambier JW, *Links in my life on land and sea*, New York, Dutton, 1906, 135; Muhlhauser GHP, *The cruise of the Amaryllis*, Boston, Small and Maynard, 1925, 133.

³⁴ The original source for this consistent mistake is not known.

emancipation symbolised by the founding of *Union Calédonienne* in 1953 and the deliberate doubling of the European population between 1946 and 1969 were also ignored in an attempt to visually record the “natural” evolution of a settler-capitalist colonial society.

Although statistics noted by authors on the European population in the 1930s and 1970s were reasonably accurate there was wide discrepancy in the cited population of Kanaks. Loyalty Islanders were either omitted or included in the Kanak population. In 1935, *Walkabout* claimed there were 40000 “natives” but this figure was adjusted in 1939 to 29000. By 1949 the figure of 30000 Kanaks and Loyalty Islanders was being used. Authors had not bothered to research these figures or deliberately omitted the tragic nadir of Kanak population. The Kanak population in the first recorded census of 1887 was 31000 on Grande Terre plus 11000 in the Loyalty Islands. It fell to the lowest recorded level of 16,194 in 1921, improved to 28000 in 1939 and 40000 in 1976 and then experienced an amazing recovery which eventually saw Kanaks move to 35% of the population in 1983.

The dance, costume, weapons, material culture, canoes and pottery from the Pacific, Africa and Asia that dominated published photography world-wide from 1900 to 1930 was considered in the case of New Caledonia less interesting than settler economic prosperity, scenic grandeur and transplanted French customs and culture. Kanak culture was not judged to be visually interesting to Australian readers. The few human-interest, character-study portraits included an old Kanak man, a Kanak *gendarme*, a punt operator and a group of young kanak fishermen, all borrowed from postcards produced thirty years earlier at the turn of the century. A *case* with a distinctive identifying *flèche faitière* (central rooftop totem) and two cars parked at the front was mistakenly captioned to suggest modern Kanak owned cars. While Kanak were marginalised in text and visual reporting, authors wrote enthusiastically of Noumea’s plural society, hinting perhaps that Australian readers might appreciate the common problems and possible potential of Australia’s own post-war ethnic diversity. Tonkinese, Japanese and Javanese were shown working on farms, operating street markets and posing with their children.

The selective nature of the photography entering the public domain reinforced an outdated view, described by Alain Saussol as *France australe* or the chimera of a European dominated settler colony. The pre-war dream of rural agricultural prosperity with French and Kanak settled on the land (if unequally) changed dramatically to a post-war dream that was urbanised, industrial and “pluri-ethnic while remaining monocultural and unquestioning of the superiority inherent in the old colonial order”.³⁵ Photographers following conventions already established in colonial photography therefore offered an anachronistic, archaic view of “old” New Caledonia. *Walkabout*’s editors could exercise some discretion but predilection and preconceived notions of France, French colonies and the “civilising mission” meant they could not avoid being single dimensional. Mid-century mass-media audiences preferred exotic locations described in familiar language and literary conventions rather than polemics and critical anti-colonial dogma. Burchett’s book in 1941 followed the same photographic subject matter as *Walkabout*. Burchett claimed to have taken a “series of pictures which have been reproduced in many parts of the world”.³⁶ In *Pacific Island Treasure* he included some Kanak material and scenic views but 50 percent of the photographs were of economic activities. A photograph taken during the 1940 coup that removed the pro-Vichy government was borrowed by Burchett from a local photographer. He included photographs of Javanese and Japanese workers and in the only full-page photogenic, studio-style portrait he privileged his hotel’s Tonkinese house-girl above Kanak subject matter and portraits.

In comparison Schmidt’s thirty photographs in 1944 were overwhelmingly devoted to settler activities in mining, cities and rural industry (83%) and included only two portraits of Kanak and one of a village. HEL Priday’s *Cannibal Island*, also released in 1944, included thirteen photographs evenly divided between Kanak portraits and scenic views. A comparison with the 52 photographs of Vanuatu in Kathleen Woodburn’s *Backwash of empire*, also released in 1944,³⁷ reveals a sharp contrast with the

³⁵ Saussol A, “The colonial chimera; from annexation to the re-emergence of Kanak identity” in *New Caledonia; essays in nationalism and dependency*, edited by Michael Spencer, Alan Ward and John Connell, Brisbane, UQP, 1988, 39.

³⁶ Burchett W, 1941, 69. Burchett also published an article, “At Koniëne Island New Caledonia” in *Walkabout* with two photographs; *Walkabout*, July 1941, 41-43

³⁷ Woodburn MK, *Backwash of empire*, Melbourne, Georgian House, 1944. In twelve photographs the subjects were named, an unusually high percentage in books of the era. The remaining

European settler emphasis in the pictorial coverage of New Caledonia. Fifty percent of Woodburn's photographs were portraits of niVanuatu men, women and children, in groups or individually. Vanuatu was presented visually with large indigenous population following a traditional way of life remote from the control exercised by the joint Franco-British colonial administration. In contrast, in the 1940s books on New Caledonia it was depicted visually as modern, urbanised, industrialised settler economy with an indigenous population hidden away on *cantonnements* and reservations.

The geography of New Caledonia also affected the range of subject matter available to photographers. Noumea dominated New Caledonia and lesser towns such Bourail and Houailou were far away over rough roads or accessible only on small coastal steamers. *Cantonnement* and Kanak settlements were remote and rarely visited. Agricultural development was limited to coastal districts and a few river flood plains, some with road links to Noumea, and photographers preferred European cash crops and export staples to Kanak subsistence gardens. Determined travellers like Beatrice Grimshaw in 1924, Burchett in 1941 and Coral and Leslie Rees in 1959 could take less travelled routes but generally rural photography was limited to a few mines, closely settled areas and scenic highlights such as "The towers of Notre Dame" at Hienghene (also known as "The brooding hen" when viewed from a different angle.) The only Kanak settlement to be cited in *Walkabout* was St Louis, a Marist Mission sixteen kilometres from Noumea, and only because it was a Christian village and "said to be one of the finest in the island" where Melanesians "welcome a stranger with a smile and wave". Although the text claimed photogenic "black children wander about huts of mud and grass,"³⁸ no photographs of St Louis were published in *Walkabout*.

Descriptions of Kanaks in the text were typically racist, demeaning and Eurocentric in the manner authors in Australia wrote of Indigenous Australians. Before the Pacific War, Kanaks were described as "chocolate brown, woolly-headed race of Papuan origin", "a poor type of Melanesian" and always a "morose, sullen sort of chap who was an acknowledged cannibal not long ago".³⁹ Charles Sayers alleged young boys "were dedicated to warfare from birth". He agreed that despite being "head hunters and cannibals" they were also "tall, muscular – expert bush men and tireless trackers ... skilled farmers and brought water great distances along channels and bamboo pipes to irrigate their lands".⁴⁰ Although considered amiable "the naïve visitor cannot get out his mind their background of fighting and cannibalism".⁴¹ Twenty years later Kanaks were still being described as a "happy but not very industrious people living mainly in villages under tribal chiefs where time-honoured native foods still form their staple diet".⁴² This romantic view of the "South Seas" was a literary convention with three hundred years history.

Mid-century readers, unaware of the tragic dispossession of Kanaks, probably agreed with *Walkabout's* claim that Kanaks had "an easy life as tropical landowners".⁴³ Of interest to readers and a significant motivation in Australian reportage of New Caledonia was French policy towards indigenous labour, or more specifically the untrammelled use of local indigenous peoples as a cheap, accessible labour for mines, plantations and other exploitative European-owned enterprises in the colonies. Kanaks, forced on to reserves or off-shore islands and choosing deliberately to withdraw as much as possible from the colonial wage economy, had not been integrated into the New Caledonia's settler economy as indentured or conscripted labour.⁴⁴ Kanak reluctance to do the "white man's hard labour" was explained to *Walkabout's* readers by repeating the 19th century racist adage that "as a general rule these people of the South Seas dislike regular employment".⁴⁵ Yet photographs depicted Kanak and Loyalty Islanders working punts, serving in the *gendarmerie*, loading ships, driving ox-carts, raking dried

photographs included five picturesque and two village scenes as well as shipping, cattle and sheep farming on the ranch she visited.

³⁸ Henty S, "New Caledonia", *Walkabout*, November 1935, 31.

³⁹ Anon, "New Caledonia", *Walkabout*, January 1935, 51; Nicholls E, 1938, 37; Hall B, October 1939, 16.

⁴⁰ Sayers CE, 1953, 29

⁴¹ Lees C and Lees L, 1949, 12

⁴² Lyons L and Lyons M, 1959, 11

⁴³ Lees C and Lees L, 1949, 12

⁴⁴ Denoon D, Mein-Smith P and Wyndham M, *A history of Australia, New Zealand and the Pacific*, London, Blackwell, 2000, 170; Lyons M, 1986, 86-98; Connell J, 1987, 87-89 and 117; Saussol A, 1988, 38-55.

⁴⁵ Hall B, December 1939, 19; Lees C and Lees L, 1949, 12.

coffee beans and serving petrol at a garage. This contradiction between visual and text imaging is typical of illustrated magazines of the period raises two questions. Was the text or the photograph more important in attitude formation and learning-by-looking? In looking-past the image, were audiences able to grasp any deeper nuances and meanings. In forty years of reporting, only the travelogue writer Stephen Henty declared in print that Kanaks faced racial discrimination, commenting only in passing, “evidently they were not allowed in” to a ball at the *Hotel de Ville* in Noumea in 1935.⁴⁶

Although Loyalty Islanders were rarely mentioned in the books and magazines, HEL Priday praised the blending of Polynesian and European influences and Loyalty Islanders ability to harmonise, declaring they were “more handsome, adaptable and energetic than the mainland natives, and they make fine sailors”.⁴⁷ In 1941, Burchett inadvertently defended Loyalty Islanders when he wrote “for those who believe Kanaks are stupid people, incapable and unwilling to learn, I should like to present Emile”. But, Emile was a Loyalty Islander. Burchett also spoke of the Kanak “boys” unloading ships at the wharf only to discover they were also Loyalty Islanders. He thought Loyalty Islanders were “handsomer, according to European standards, than the Melanesians. They lack too, the heaviness and sombreness of the New Caledonians”.⁴⁸ Burchett, Schmidt and Priday either did not include, or failed to identify, photographs of Loyalty Islanders.

Walkabout's coverage conflated picturesque travelogue with economic forecasting, geological and geographic description, propaganda and nationalist posturing. *Walkabout* reminded readers New Caledonia was a foreign country just four days sailing away and argued Australians should not ignore New Caledonia as an investment, commercial or tourist destination. Old literary favourites like quoting James Cook's 1774 description “Caledonia stern and wild” eventually gave way to repeating the phrase “*La vie douce*,” a cliché used by visiting celebrity photographer Rennie Ellis in his *Walkabout* article in 1971.⁴⁹ The classic photographs of colonial regimes such as uniformed indigenous *gendarmes* welcoming passengers at the wharf, gave way in the 1970s to photographs of bikini-clad Australians frolicking in the lagoon, bare-chested Kanak men carrying home their daily catch of fish and Mother-Hubbard wearing women playing Melanesian-style cricket.

Forty years of superficial visual evidence was further confused by contradictory text and images. Although predominantly urban, Australia was a settler society that had marginalising indigenous people and maximised prosperity by agricultural and industrial exploitation of the land, so some mid-century readers may have critically scrutinised individual photographs and questioned the world order, the continuation of the colonialism, capitalist expansion and the fate of indigenous peoples. However, Australian audiences probably accepted uncritically the visual record of New Caledonia's evolving 20th century colonial history, thought it quite like Australia and concluded with the comment, “Oh, what an interesting place.” *Walkabout*, for example, remains in the “singular authoritative” category of history and unfortunately this has meant its photographic record of forty years of Australia-New Caledonia relationships have been overlooked by historians.

A singular authoritative history of colonialism has been displaced by multiple, critical histories “manifested in scholarly monographs, verbal anecdotes and personal letters” and as Nicholas Thomas notes, citing Greg Denning, “histories are told in film and novels as well as academic texts.”⁵⁰ Histories are also told in photographs. Elizabeth Edwards suggests the nexus between photography and history is revealed by the way audiences engage with photographs and by acknowledgement of the various possibilities that an image implies “through absences within the image.”⁵¹ Photography's importance

⁴⁶ Henty S, 1935, 30.

⁴⁷ Priday HEL, 1943, 36.

⁴⁸ Burchett W, 1941, 20, 46 and 184

⁴⁹ Ellis R, “*La vie douce* in the South Pacific, Noumea”, *Walkabout*, April 1971, 15-22

⁵⁰ Thomas N, *In Oceania; visions, artefacts, histories*, Durham, Duke University Press, 1997, 33 and 156; Denning G, *The death of William Gooch; a history's anthropology*, Honolulu, University of Hawaii Press, 1995.

⁵¹ Edwards E, *Raw histories; photographs, anthropology and museums*, Oxford, Berg, 2001, 87.

as evidence of a period of colonial expansion therefore demands of historians that they contextualize the images read by audiences in the public domain and go beyond the meanings intended by the photographers in the field and the editors back home. As Christopher Pinney notes, looking-past, recoding or resurfacing suggests “a complexity of layers that endow photographs with an enormously greater complexity than that which they are usually credited.”⁵² The British publication of photographs of New Caledonia was not contributing to the formation of French metropolitan self-identity, nor was it providing evidence for the French public on how far their colony had been “civilised.”⁵³ but it may have affirmed Australian self-identity and role in the British Empire.⁵⁴ The published images of New Caledonia did “explicate the mentality and emotive life”⁵⁵ in a Pacific colony but this level of understanding based on visual evidence may have been set aside by the excitement of the Pacific War and then the post-war expansion of tourism. As they were opportunistically snapped or carefully composed in Noumea, *la Brousse* or the *Chaîne Centrale*, carried back to Australia, published in books and magazines, passed around and remembered, each stage in a photograph’s trajectory had its own absences, complexity and history. Looking past the image to the audience in the public domain allows access to what Edwards called the forensic reality of the subject matter, but also access to the implied, refigured histories of New Caledonia and Australia that enmesh each image.

⁵² Pinney, *op.cit.*, 4-5 and 7

⁵³ The role of photography as evidence for comparable rates of “civilization” is discussed in relation to Japan’s colonial conquest of Manchukuo; see Morris Low, “The Japanese colonial eye; science, exploration and empire” in Christopher Pinney and Nicolas Peterson, eds, *Photographies other histories*, Durham, Duke University Press, 2003, 100-118. For a Philippines example see, Benito Vergara, *Displaying Filipinos; photography and colonialism in early 20th century Philippines*, Manila, University of Philippines Press, 1995.

⁵⁴ See Christopher Pinney, “Introduction; How the other half ...” in Christopher Pinney and Nicolas Peterson, *op.cit.*, 2003. 1-14.

⁵⁵ Pinney, *op.cit.*, 3